

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 002030

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/PPD (MQUINN), NEA/ARPI, ECA/PE
STATE PASS TO USTR:JBUNTIN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [OEXC](#) [SNAR](#) [TBIO](#) [ETRD](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: NEW SPORTS MINISTER ON THE BALL, BUT OFF ECONOMIC TEAM

REF: MUSCAT 1898

Summary

1. (SBU) Oman's energetic new Minister of Sports, Ali al-Sunaidi, shared with the Ambassador his active agenda for developing athletics in Oman. He is eager to build linkages to the U.S. and other countries, both to develop sports programs and training facilities, as well as to market Oman as an ideal venue for regional tournaments. Acknowledging that his October appointment to a newly established ministry came as a surprise, Sunaidi is busy addressing the key complaints he said the Sultan had with the predecessor agency. As one of the USG's key economic interlocutors during his stint as Ministry of Commerce Under Secretary, Sunaidi admitted that his new duties will preclude him from playing any role in the ongoing Free Trade Agreement talks with the U.S. He had no insights when a new Commerce Under Secretary might be appointed. The Embassy will look to the

SIPDIS

new Ministry of Sports as an ideal partner for engaging Omani youth. End Summary.

2. (U) On November 22, the Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/E Chief, paid a courtesy call on the new Minister of Sports, Ali bin Masoud al-Sunaidi. Sunaidi, who had been a key interlocutor with the USG on bilateral trade and investment issues during his erstwhile stint as Under Secretary at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, was appointed to head the newly created ministry in a surprise royal decree October 20 (reftel).

A Surprise to All

3. (SBU) Sunaidi admitted that his appointment as Minister of Sport came as a surprise, though he said he had worked while at the Ministry of Commerce (MOCI) on a number of committees that dealt with sports and youth-related issues. The Sultan, he said, wanted a "thematic" change in the way the now-defunct General Organization for Youth, Sports and Culture Affairs (GOYSCA) did business. One of GOYSCA's greatest weaknesses was its relationship with the media, which Sunaidi has immediately undertaken to address by launching its own website during the recent Eid al-Fitr holiday. Putting his Commerce Ministry expertise to good use, Sunaidi teamed a trio of his Ministry's marketing experts with an outside graphics firm (a pair of brothers educated in the U.S.) and a local confectioner to further publicize the new website with a candy give-away that went from inception to distribution of 5000 gift boxes in just 3 days. The website (www.sportsoman.com) invites visitors to "write to the Minister," and Sunaidi gleefully reported getting messages from Oman, Europe and North America (on everything from the high cost of tickets to the grammar on the website).

4. (SBU) The Minister said the Sultan was also disappointed with how little GOYSCA interacted with ordinary Omanis. Demonstrating his hands-on approach, Sunaidi recalled working out in a local club and observing suspiciously well-sculpted weightlifters. He interviewed star Omani bodybuilder Haji Shahban about the prevalence of steroid and other performance-enhancing drug use, and was alarmed to hear that indeed some Omani athletes are injecting banned substances. Sunaidi teamed with an Under Secretary from the Ministry of Health to talk to directors of several leading clubs and made a carrot-and-stick offer. Sunaidi promised to use the resources of his Ministry to promote and advertise those clubs that enforced a zero-tolerance policy on illegal drugs, while threatening to revoke the registration and drive out of business any sports club that permitted such use. Haji Shahban was enlisted to headline a public awareness campaign that will feature warning posters in sports facilities around the Sultanate. (An interview with Shahban is also featured on the Ministry's website.) In another effort at outreach,

the Ministry is building an SMS network that will allow them to instantly send out text messages to cellular subscribers on sports events. Such an network, the Minister said, would have been used to advertise the visit of two Georgetown University basketball players who came to Oman (Nov 21-23) as Embassy-sponsored cultural ambassadors.

Seeking Foreign Partners

15. (U) One of Sunaidi's top priorities is to put Oman on the international sports map. He would like to see Oman take advantage of its public facilities to host regional and international events (everything from soccer tournaments and track and field competitions to rally racing). He also thinks Oman could carve out a unique niche as a year-round high-altitude training center if such a facility could be built in the Jebel Akhdar mountains inland from Muscat. The Ambassador suggested the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs or a similar facility in Flagstaff, Arizona as potential resources and exemplars. Sunaidi is also looking to foreign partners to help his Ministry to develop its own lab and diagnostic center to assess the physical capacity of young athletes. Oman's Ali al-Habsi, the leading goalie in the Norwegian soccer league, was never envisioned by his coaches and friends while growing up as a likely world-class athlete, according to Sunaidi. He would like to discover other potential gifted athletes at an earlier age. Sunaidi also sees practical applications. There is an entire industry of Omani skin divers who gather 7000 tons of abalone each year off the coast of Salalah, who are able to dive to great depths with no diving equipment. Studying how these divers achieve this feat would serve both the fishing industry and sports medicine.

16. (SBU) As a graduate himself (engineering) of the sports-crazed University of Miami, Sunaidi is keen on obtaining sports scholarships for more Omani athletes. He said there are only three such scholarships currently available, which ultimately means finding good athletes with exceptional school records. As a "lifelong B-plus student," Sunaidi would prefer having many more scholarships available so that they can be awarded instead to exceptional athletes who are also good students. U.S. scholarships, he lobbied, would give the USG excellent public relations benefit. He envisions these student athletes becoming true leaders, both in sports and life beyond. Building a culture of athlete leaders is one of his goals as minister. (Though he used the analogy of developing "quarterbacks," Sunaidi is opposed to the idea of popularizing American football in Oman. Sunaidi is satisfied with following the progress of the Miami Hurricanes and Dolphins from afar.)

17. (SBU) Saying the ministry currently has "zero links to the U.S.," Sunaidi seeks American interlocutors - not at the USOC level per se, but at the mid-levels. He believes Omanis have a great potential to develop in such sports as volleyball, running, shooting, "throwing sports" (javelin, discus), marine sports, and equestrian events. Oman already has leagues ("associations") for soccer, cricket (established earlier this month), field hockey, volleyball and basketball. Rally racing is another potential growth sport, buoyed by the popularity of Oman's star rally racer Hamed al-Wahaibi. (Wahaibi started out racing motorcycles while pursuing a business degree at the University of San Diego, and in 2001 became the first Arab to win a European rally race. In 2004, he became a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF.) He is intrigued by the notion of reality shows such as "The Amazing Race" coming to Oman, and has an idea to create his own television show centered around athletic competitions. (Note: Curiously, Sunaidi gave no indication that he was tapping into his own alma mater at the U. of Miami to build linkages. End note.)

Hanging Up His Economic Shoes (For Now)

18. (SBU) Given the key role Sunaidi played in the bilateral trade relationship as the rising young star at the Ministry of Commerce, the Ambassador inquired if he foresaw playing any role in the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) process now that the USG and Omani government have embarked upon it. Sunaidi noted that he will have an equal voice in issues that come before the full cabinet, as any minister would. But as Minister of Sports, he says he already has responsibility for the roughly 40 percent of the Omani population that falls between the ages of 10-26. Given the huge task he has in bringing his new ministry up to the standards set by the Sultan, he said he would have absolutely no time to be involved in FTA. He expressed confidence that Commerce Minister Maqbool Sultan will successfully navigate the Omani government through the FTA process, and could offer no insights into who or when a successor may be found as Under Secretary for Commerce and Industry. (Comment: Officials at

SIPDIS

the Commerce Ministry likewise told EconOff November 23 there is still no word on a likely successor to Sunaidi, whose duties are currently being handled by the Under Secretary for Administration and Financial Affairs at the Ministry. End comment.)

9. (SBU) Again applying his economic expertise, Sunaidi plans to achieve greater efficiencies in the Sports Ministry's work. He admits that its cadre of 400 employees, working out of a somewhat dilapidated 8-story building near the Central Business District, is more than necessary. Rather than reducing their number (a feat he termed problematic), he intends to put them to more productive use. He also argued that the 30 government-funded athletic clubs in the country are not sustainable. He believes it would be more economical to reduce their number to 15 and simply transport people to the remaining venues, which would then get a larger share of financial support.

Comment

10. (SBU) Sunaidi's energy and intellect has made him in recent years a top candidate to become minister. In just his first month on the job, he has done everything to reinforce that view. Sunaidi's leadership undeniably affords us a key opportunity to expand our youth engagement through the medium of sports, as we happened to do with the Georgetown University basketball players. We plan to work closely with him in further exploiting such chances.
BALTIMORE